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AUTHOR Horwood, Bert
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ABSTRACT

A workshop and demonstration in ritual and ceremonies for classroom teachers with an elementary interest in the subject described the value and application of rituals in the classroom environment. Participants, who were greeted ceremoniously, learned that rituals can be incorporated into the classroom to mark special events, to enhance changes in attitudes and behavior, and to call attention to particularly important relationships. Participants also learned about five important elements of rituals: words, music and dance, giveaways in the American Indian tradition, special objects, and items that stimulate all the senses. The workshop contained four examples that illustrated how rituals and ceremonies can be incorporated into the classroom: (1) the initial handshake, to establish direct personal contact with students; (2) the candle lighting, to begin formal class sessions; (3) the physical exercises in the yoga and tai chi ch'uan tradition, to increase energy; and (4) the oudoor ritual, to increase the appreciation and awareness of man's interdependence with nature. (SB)

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RITUALS AND CEREMONIES FOR TEACHERS

A DEMONSTRATION-WORKSHOP

BERT HORWOOD

FACULTY OF EDUCATION
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY
KINGSTON, ONTARIO
K7L 3N6

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A presentation to the Annual Conference of the Association for Experiential Education, Williams Bay, Wisconsin, September 29 to October 2, 1983.

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Introduction

This paper describes a demonstration and workshop in rituals and ceremonies for teachers. Much of the action would be lost if only the words used were repeated here. Thus I have used small type to mark the descriptions of actions and events that were critically important parts of the whole.

The presentation was aimed at classroom teachers who have an elementary or beginner's interest in the subject. The nature of the conference at which the presentation was made ensured that the teachers were strongly disposed toward experience-based education and probably held strong humanistic and holistic values. It was important to say that ritual and ceremony, as discussed here, do not attach to any set of religious beliefs, nor to any supernatural or magical ideas. Rather, they are put forward as natural, normal and entirely free of identification with any particular religion.

The emphasis on practical ideas for immediate use made it necessary to reduce the amount of discussion devoted to theoretical matters. Interested readers should look up to the sources listed in the references section.

Background

As participants arrived they were greeted by the workshop leader with a hand-shake and the presentation of a small piece of feldspar and the words like these, "Welcome to our workshop on rituals and ceremonies for teachers. I'm Bert Horwood and I'd like you to have this piece of feldspar from my place at Desert Lake." Some of the participants responded with their names, some were puzzled, some enjoyed the feldspar. When the group was complete, the leader gave a brief outline of the agenda and gave the following information.

On a simple and elementary basis there are three strong reasons for teachers to more consciously incorporate rituals and ceremonies into the life and work of their classes. And of course I am refering to ritual in its powerful sense. A routine that has been repeated without meaning for years may be an empty ritual, but for now let's confine the the meaning of the word to events that are highly significant to those taking part. The three reasons are to mark special events, to enhance changes in attitude and behaiour, and to call attention to particularly important relationships.

Rituals and ceremonies are useful to focus attention on, and to cause participation in, the great cyclical events of nature and the human life cycle. The soltstices and equinoxes are examples of great events in nature with which students and teachers could become more attuned. Similarly, the great events that punctuate our personal life histories can be set aside by appropriate ceremonies.

Rituals enable the group to change their point of view of things. A ritual can make the ordinary become extraordinary, the profane to be sacred and the spiritual to shine through in the material. From changed points of view, come changed attitudes and altered behaviour.

The relations among people, or between a person and the natural environment, or between a person and their work can be the subject of rituals and ceremonies. The tendency to focus on relationships, to validate them and enrich them, is a strong value to be found in many ceremonies.

Rituals have several useful elements. It is natural and easy for us to put words first, although there are reasons for thinking that, given our left-brain dominance in schools, we should put words last. All the same, words are an important component of rituals and need to be organized with special care for the effect intended. The words should be inspiring, simple and poetic. Words in the forms of chants, song and poetry tend to be most effective. Music and dance are also important elements. A drum or tambourine can provide desirable rhythmic influence andchants are enhanced by accompanying movement.

Other important elements include the give-away, the use of all the senses including smell and the presence of special objects dedicated for ritual use. The idea of the give-away has come to us from the American Indians. The idea is that there may be an object of real or Symbolic value which is given away to a participant in the ceremony. It is critically important not to confuse the notion of give-away with our normal idea of a gift exchange. There is no reciprocity in the give-away. This forces participants to confront the need to accept their dependence upon others as a reality. And the the consequnces for environmental education of this idea are enormous. As we demonstrate actual ceremonies to illustrate these various ideas you will see the use of special objects and the sense of smell exemplified.

Finally, it is important to recognize that no ritual or ceremony can convey meaning to the participants unless there is a deliberate intention to do so. There are no coincidental or casual rituals. The significance of the ceremony must be both explicit and implicit. The deliberateness must be evident to everyone. When this element is lacking, a ritual that might have had power becomes empty. Probably you can think of such meaningless acts that persist in our society and our schools to-day. The point is that the meaning must be clear and dominanT in the hearts and minds of all the participants.

For further information and detail on these introductory ideas, I suggest two excellent primers: The first is Earth Festivals by Dolores LaChapelle, and the second is The Compassionate Teacher by Jonathon Miller. LaChapelle's Earth Wisdom provides a more thorough philosophical background.

Examples

The first example happened as people arrived. There was a give-away of a piece of feldspar, a chunk of Mother Earth, and an elementary ritual greeting in the form of a hand shake and words of welcome. I contrived this opening deliberately to impell everyone into a ritual relationship with me and with the others present. It also serves to illustrate a very simple but effective ritual that makes a very real difference in the climate of a classroom. Just shaking hands on a regular basis with one's pupils is all that it takes. Normally, I do this at the beginning or end of each class, or when handing back papers, or upon dismissal immediately prior to a holiday or weekend. It is a valuable way of ensuring direct personal contact with each and every student.

The second example combines the elements of sense of smell, use of a ritual object, the idea of deliberateness and words.

The leader passed a bag containing sprigs of an herb like sage or sweet basil to a person with instructions to the whole group to take a leaf or two of the herb and rub it on the forehead, nose, cheeks, wrists, or other convenient place. The leader explains that the herb is being used to mark the passage of the group into a time of special intent and action. (Burning incense or a naturally pungent fibre has the same effect and role in a ritual.) Then a square of bright cloth was carefully and ceremoniously laid out, a candle placed on it and deliberately lighted. A short poem was read.

This is another useful ceremony for starting a class session. It helps to call the group together, the burning candle is rich in the symbolism of learning which can be described from time to time. In my own practice, I normally reserve the use of the herb for entry into events that require a special use of imagination, creativity and make-believe. But the candle-lighting is an effective way to open each formal class session.

The third example is to provide a kind of physical exercise for the students. But the exercise has a different intent from aerobics or calisthenics. Here we try to re-integrate the person's body and mind in a centred sort of way. The exercises are drawn from the eastern schools of yoga and tai chi ch'uan. The emphasis is upon increasing energy by slow relaxed movement and deep easy ventilation of the lungs.

At this point the group was asked to stand, find a clear place and follow the leader in two of exercises described by Yang Ming-shih. These activities are profoundly relaxing and at the same time energizing.

Miller's book gives a lot of other useful exercises. In practice, this sort of thing is especially appropriate after a long session of seat work, or whenever the classroom has been tense, or at times when pupils are a little "hyper" or silly. Stability and proper relationships are renewed in this way.

The final example is a ritual worked outdoors as part of the process of tapping trees to make maple syrup. The ritual was designed to meet the need of a group who were sensitive to the violence intrinsic in tapping the trees. The violence of the drilling the hole and hammering the spile is absolutely unavoidable. Yet somehow, it must be acknowledged and discharged. The North American Indians were also aware that they lived by the lives yielded up by other creatures (see Storm and also Neihardt). Thus, I borrowed from Black Elk and wrote an "Address to the Trees" (copy attached) which is used each spring when the maples are tapped.

The group moved outdoors where, in sensory awareness fashion, each person selected a tree to lean against, or hug, or otherwise touch. Given the time of year of the demonstration it was necessary to paint a word picture of the sugar maple bush in late February, and to get people to imagine they were there. The "address" was then recited, but the actual drilling of the tap holes and so on was omitted.

There followed a series of questions and comments on the ideas and demonstrations.

Conclusion

Rituals and ceremonies, wisely chosen and skillfully implemented, can profoundly influence the climate and learning within a classroom. There is a grave danger, though, that in the search for novelty we may overlook important potential rituals that we already have but do not exploit. On the other hand, our society lacks certain important and significant ritual ways of doing things that need to be done. There is a case to be made for the making of new rituals. Somehow, these two have to be balanced in a productive blend of old and new.

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Address to the Sugar Maples

For Mac Freeman, on the occasion of tapping at Kepler, 1981
-- Bert Horwood ~

Hear us, O trees; shade givers, water-holders, sugar-makers.

We know you are alive. Like us you grow and die
Like us, you renew your kind in season. We are ceaselessly intertwined together in the great web of life
You are our kin

Your special glory is to use sunlight to make food. And ours is to move about and use tools.

We have come therefore, like the squirrels and the birds to share in the exuberant excess of your sap. May it well up in rich tides, pulsing as the days grow and the nights chill.

The harsh bite of the drills will not touch your sturdy heartwood. We will tap no small tree and from none will we draw off more than you can spare in good health.

We thankfully seek your silent assent to this tapping.

~Let the sugaring begin ~

Now we're going to initiate this shiny new syrup pan into the state of affairs here, where it will be so central to our activities.

Let's think about this pan as an implement that leads to the integration of the whole universe in miniature

Here is the pan, wrought from the earth and symbolizing all that is solid.

Its function is to support the watery sap symbolizing all that is liquid

The boiling of the sap returns excess water to the air symbolizing all that is gaseous

The whole process is driven by fire, symbolizing all that is energy

Thus, with our own skill, ingenuity and care we can in reality and in symbol knit together earth, air, water and fire to produce a balm for both mind and body.

For Mac Freeman on the occasion of the new sugar pan at Kepler 1982

~Bert Horwood~